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ABSTRACT

Educational policy alone will not create successful educational improvement. This summary presents key findings from 5 years of research on policy and finance, conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). Key findings include: (1) U.S. schools have demonstrated important, positive changes in practice, attitude, and student achievement; (2) most states and many districts have adopted standards-based reforms; (3) education policy has not yet provided coherent, effective guidance on how to improve instruction; (4) reforms are not always realistic; (5) reformers often overemphasize structural changes and pay inadequate attention to instructional quality; (6) policymakers overlook the role that students could play in raising their achievement; and (7) funding is a key element of education reform and reform policy. Sections provide greater detail about the role and limits of policy, standards-based reform, the impact of policy on the classroom, intergovernmental relations and school policy, ways to build new capacity for school reform, factors that facilitate structural change, major trends in school finance, and ways to increase education productivity. A list of CPRE publications and consortium management centers is included. (LMI)

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CPRE

Public Policy and School Reform

A Research Summary

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Policy can play an important role in stimulating and sustaining education reform. But educational improvement is not simply a matter of "getting the policy right." Many other factors—including culture, politics, the economy, social forces, and the norms and knowledge of educators—affect the progress of reform in schools, and shape the behavior of teachers and their interactions with students.

This summary presents some key findings from five years' of research on policy and finance conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). We hope these observations help focus future discussions on strategies and policy initiatives that show promise, and help policymakers avoid some past pitfalls.

Among the key findings in this summary:

- **Schools in the United States have demonstrated important, positive changes** in practice, attitude and student achievement in recent years. Standards-based reforms and increased professional development focused on content are contributing to the changes.

- **Most states and many districts have adopted standard-based reforms,** in an effort to forge more coherent policy. These efforts have faced considerable obstacles, including a lack of public consensus on what standards should be and serious shortfalls in the "capacity" of many schools to strive for higher standards. However, the reforms have strong momentum, in large measure because of the activities of numerous professional groups and networks at every level of the system.

- **Education policy has not yet provided coherent, effective guidance** on how to improve instruction in the United States. Even where policy has been articulated clearly, policy alone is not enough to bring about successful school reform. Other key factors include educators' knowledge and skill, the efforts of professional associations and reform organizations, and parent and community engagement.

- **Reforms are not always realistic,** or based on understanding of what will actually work. Knowledge of what types of policy and education reform work in different contexts, or of how to transform successful demonstration projects into large-scale reforms, is more limited than many like to admit. This is one reason why the rhetoric of reform often exceeds the accomplishments that are actually made.

- **Reformers often put too much emphasis** on structural changes, such as lengthened class periods or common teacher planning time, and pay inadequate attention to high-quality instruction, because they wrongly assume that structural changes will automatically boost achievement.

- **Policymakers do not pay enough attention** to the role that students could play in raising their achievement. They especially neglect ways in which students' effort and readiness to learn could be improved.

- **Funding is a key element** of education reform and reform policy. Current school-funding systems create too many inequities among schools, deny critical resources to schools that serve disadvantaged students, and are not well suited to dynamic, school-based reform.

CPRE was established in 1985 with a 5-year U.S. Department of Education grant. The research reported here was conducted during CPRE's second grant period, 1990-1995.

Reformers generally advocate using government policy to spur changes in the behavior of teachers and other educators, with the goal of boosting student performance. CPRE has found, however, that while policy has had some significant effects, it hasn't yet provided coherent, effective guidance on how to improve instruction.

- **Policy has helped to focus attention** on the need to improve teaching and learning. For example, standards-based policies focused on challenging goals for student performance can stimulate efforts to improve instruction.
- **Policy has helped to mobilize resources.** By focusing on improving instruction and student achievement, policy encourages educators to seek the resources and knowledge necessary to improve practice. Policy also plays an important role in providing those resources. Policy support for professional development or for instructional materials, for example, provides essential assistance.
- **U.S. education policy is developed and implemented in a fragmented and conflicting way.** Rapidly changing political priorities have often halted new initiatives before they begin but even when state policy is clear, local responses vary. Some may see a policy initiative as reinforcing their own beliefs about instruction, and move to aggressively adopt it. Others might ignore it, and still others may take only tentative steps to adopt it.
- **Policies overlap.** As new and sometimes conflicting policy interpretations filter down to individual schools, districts and communities, they must compete with old policies and directives that have never been removed.

To address the fragmentation, almost every state has tried a reform strategy intended to bring more coherence to education policy focused on teaching and learning. Much of CPRE's work has focused on this approach, called standards-based reform, because it has been so central to state, local and national education policy in the early 1990s.

The new instructional guidance strategies seek to:

- **establish** challenging academic standards for what all students should know and be able to do in key subjects;
- **align** policies, such as teacher certification and professional development, testing, and accountability programs, to those standards; and
- **restructure** governance to let schools, districts and local communities create specific curricula and instructional approaches to meet the state's broader standards.

Standards-based reforms seek to foster more advanced student knowledge and expertise in core subject areas, such as mathematics, science, language arts, writing, history, civics, and geography.

The reforms involve complex challenges, including how to:

- **develop** appropriate and useful instructional guidance documents and assessments for schools and districts;
- **connect** reform to teacher education and professional development;
- **blend leadership from the top** with bottom-up restructuring;
- **create** the organizational and individual capacity to promote ambitious student outcomes; and
- **serve** students with special needs.

Efforts to establish standards and to coordinate policies have been slowed by conflict over the content of standards, leadership turnover and resource constraints. In addition, the nature of the standards being sought—as reflected in documents laying out what students should know and be able to do, and in statewide testing programs—has changed a great deal since this reform movement first began. Some states have:

- **removed** "affective" goals, such as "self esteem" and "working well with others," that are often associated with the approach known as Outcomes-Based Education (OBE);
- **confronted** concerns raised over the sometimes unquestioning embrace of constructivist instructional pedagogies and new performance-based assessments; and
- **rethought** the pace of reform. Some states initially took an aggressive approach to reform and rapidly de-emphasized the role of basic skills instruction, traditional pedagogies, and traditional test formats. Many are now taking a more incremental approach by blending in some innovations more slowly over time.

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Standards-based reforms remain a major focus of state efforts in 1995-96. Districts, too, have increasingly embraced standards-based reform as an important strategy. Despite the challenges, these reforms have strong momentum, in large measure because of support from outside the policy system. There is a "system" working to support systemic reform, one which furthers the goal of policy coherence, and may in turn be energized by it, but is not dependent on it. This system includes both non-government and quasi-government organizations. CPRE researchers have noted changes in standards, curriculum and practice promoted by:

- **professional associations,** such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards;
- **school-based reformers;**
- **multi-state cooperatives;** and
- **state-level professional groups.**

These efforts seem to be having effects in a number of places through a variety of avenues.

- **Textbook and test publishers,** who are — in varying degrees and ways — adopting professionally derived standards as they revise their materials.
- **Professional development opportunities** are being linked to new standards. Thanks to support by associations and organizations, knowledge is "creeping" across levels of government and throughout classrooms of many different types, to create substantial, continued momentum for standards-based reform.
- **Partnerships and collaborative efforts,** which might be termed "third-sector," are bridging the government and non-government sectors. These can be orchestrated by governments seeking to magnify support for standards reforms. For example, state agencies in California and Vermont initiated teacher networks to develop reform components.

Research on how these policy initiatives have affected classrooms offers some reasons for optimism.

- **Many teachers are at least aware of new policy directives** and are favorably disposed toward them.
- **Important changes in teacher practice have been noted in some schools and districts,** such as increased use of "real" books and stories instead of basal texts, and more "hands-on" activities in science.
- **Effects on course taking and achievement can be credited to standards reforms.** Using a sample of 4,800 student transcripts, CPRE researchers saw positive effects in "transition" high school math courses linked to ambitious NCTM-like standards. Students in California's "Math A" courses and New York's "Stretch Regents" courses were much more likely than general-track students to complete a minimal college-preparatory sequence by the end of high school. And students in transitional math classes posted better achievement test scores than students in general math (though they still lagged behind students in college-preparatory math classes).
- **Some teachers focused more clearly** on teaching problem-solving and reasoning which has helped to improve student achievement. For example, the professional development directly linked to the Math A program in California, which has a problem-solving focus, appears to have helped teachers enhance their pedagogy in these directions. Similar changes in practice have been seen by CPRE researchers in elementary and middle schools in California and Michigan, and in elementary schools in South Carolina.

But the impact of policy on classrooms has been mixed and uneven. For example, many teachers claim they have made "dramatic" changes in instruction prompted by reform. However, in reality, their new practices look only a little different from old methods. The interpretation of new policy and reform strategies also varies widely from teacher to teacher, depending on their individual knowledge, skills, and experience, and the assistance they have received.

Teacher response to school reform policy is further shaped by the social and economic conditions of their schools. These vary dramatically in the United States, resulting in great disparities in resources between schools, and often very different reactions to policy.

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CPRE researchers have reached some general conclusions about relations between different government entities that create and administer education policy, such as school districts, states and the federal government.

The conclusions include:

- **Power and influence in education policy is not a zero-sum game.** One level of government doesn't necessarily gain power over policy at the expense of others. Instead, all levels can exert a combined influence over schools. Many districts often matched or exceeded recent state initiatives in instructional guidance, and some continue to be a strong source of support and initiative for state policy design.

- **Deregulation alone does not spur much change in local school policy.** Schools also need to build additional capacity, and develop additional policies, to make use of the new flexibility. As it is, not all eligible schools take advantage of deregulation, and many that do could be called "entrepreneurs" who take advantage of virtually any resource.

- **Some types of deregulation have more far-reaching effects than others.** Blanket waivers, for example, create broader horizons for reform than rule-by-rule waivers, and the broader approach is more likely to help local educators to think differently.

- **Rhetoric around school-based management, choice, decentralization, and deregulation frequently exceeds real implementation.** Opposition from those attached to the status quo, comfort with traditional arrangements, and inertia, among other reasons, make it very difficult to redistribute authority in our educational system. Some regulations protect powerful political constituencies, but many are intended to ensure that minimal standards exist in districts of varying wealth, location, size, and capacity. Whether or not such regulations are successful, it is still difficult to argue for their removal in the face of persistent differences in resources, teacher quality and program offerings.

- **Deregulation and decentralization plans do not always work well.** Some states, for example, reward schools with flexibility because they do well academically. This approach changes the policy environment for those who have done well under it and compels less successful schools to continue under the same set of rules. Urban schools, existing in a more politicized environment than suburban schools, also may find that decentralization leaves them more vulnerable to pressure from particularly vocal constituencies, sometimes lessening the focus on academic achievement.

- **State and local agencies are slow to adapt to new policy goals.** They are typically built around complex hierarchies that hamper comprehensive approaches to reform and make aligning policy difficult.

- **State efforts often fall short of reaching the schools.** State intervention in low-performing school districts can help correct poor financial practices or stave off bankruptcy. But unless the intervention focuses specifically on instruction, the state's presence typically isn't felt beyond the district's central office.

- **Rewards and sanctions raise difficult questions.** Policies that seek to influence practice with school rewards and sanctions create difficult technical, political and implementation issues. Among these are designing appropriate and adequate measures, determining the criteria for success, and adjusting for differences in student background.

- **There are no simple, inexpensive fixes.** Few states have provided adequate technical assistance to failing schools, and our knowledge about policies to really turn such schools around is limited.

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Many researchers and reformers agree that schools and localcommunities need to develop new ways to improve teaching and learning, even though they differ about what sorts of new "capacity" are needed.

Several important elements of capacity are:

- **The intellectual ability, knowledge and skills of teachers and other staff.** CPRE researchers have seen, for example, that students learn more when their teachers have completed more coursework in the subjects they teach. But many teachers lack the knowledge they need to make the changes in teaching and assessment that reforms envision. Reformers often shape reforms without understanding what teachers will need to know and be able to do to implement them.

- **Quality and quantity of resources.** Schools can improve by increasing time for instruction, expanding the use of technology, or providing new and improved instruction materials. CPRE has found that even though school spending has been rising steadily, spending for instructional materials has not increased. Reform efforts are often hampered by inadequate instructional resources.

- **Social organization of instruction.** Collegiality and collaboration among teachers can raise morale, increase work effort, and promote the sharing of ideas and practices. School-based management can help professionals make useful changes in instruction and the use of resources, but these structural changes may not be as powerful as programs that try to directly enhance teachers' knowledge and skill.

CPRE researchers have drawn a number of conclusions from their research on efforts to build school capacity:

- **More attention should be paid to the role students could play in raising their achievement.** This implies greater focus on students' readiness to learn. Reformers also are calling attention to the gap in the incentive structure for students. Even though a college education, or high levels of writing and mathematical skills are increasingly necessary for a good job, few employers pay attention to high school performance, and only very competitive colleges put a high premium on good grades. Even if family and teachers push students to excel, today's culture sends strong anti-intellectual messages.

- **More attention should be paid to how well a school's vision, improvement strategy and instructional capacity fit together.** Plans need to be realistic, and should focus on the support and knowledge teachers need to implement reforms.

- **Reforms are often not evaluated.** False or exaggerated claims of success are currently the basis for some school-reform strategies, in part because we lack better, more timely evaluations of new practices and programs. Potential users need better information about effects, costs, conditions of success, and unanticipated effects.

- **We are particularly naive about "scaling up" reforms.** We assume that a few demonstration projects or short-term training sessions will spread successful reform principles and practices. We need to create better processes for spreading success.

- **The current system of professional development is weak, fragmented and often disconnected from proposed reforms.** Reformers assume that more professional development for teachers will lead to changes in classroom practice, and so time and money for this activity increase. But these efforts are not usually deep, challenging or well-focused. Many pass up teacher learning, for example, to focus instead on changing school structures.

- **The role of the school district has been neglected.** Districts play a major role in mediating between schools and the state, they control considerable professional development funds, and they shape resource allocation and school organization. Yet little attention has been paid to such questions as what role districts should play in school decentralization, or in creating and sustaining professional communities in schools.

It's commonly assumed that changes in school structure lead to changes in teaching practice, which then lead students to think differently and learn more. Many educators expect that when a school adopts ambitious reforms, such as site-based management, teacher teaming across grades and subjects, and flexible scheduling, test scores will go up.

But careful research suggests a picture that is more complex. Restructuring alone doesn't guarantee changes in instructional practice, or enhanced student learning. CPRE has found:

- **Many schools expend tremendous effort** and resources replacing 45-minute class periods with something different, such as 90-minute periods. But teachers don't automatically begin using those longer classes to teach in fundamentally different ways.
- **Teachers often say that classes are too big,** but when they get to work with smaller classes, they often fail to make significant changes in practice, such as giving students more personal attention or evaluation.
- **Greater teacher empowerment doesn't always lead to better teaching.** In schools focused on instructional issues, empowerment can indeed spark big changes in instruction and assessment and lead to improved student achievement. But without that focus, student achievement can remain largely unchanged.
- **School-based management and school restructuring** only work when they are focused on boosting student achievement. Without a strong focus on curriculum and instruction, these reforms can veer off in a number of directions that have little or no impact on learning.

Our research also shows that school based management works better when sites:

- **have power** over budget and personnel;
- **give decision-making power** to all teachers through a series of teams organized both vertically (such as subject-matter teams) and horizontally (such as subschool teams);
- **invest** in continuing professional development to strengthen both individual and organizational capacity, especially on curriculum, instruction, team work, and budgeting;
- **get access** to a wide range of information on revenues, expenditures, teachers, student performance, parent and community satisfaction, research results, etc.;
- **facilitate** teacher decision-making teams, through principals who become "brokers" of resources on curriculum, instruction, professional development, and other key topics; and
- **provide** rewards for improving expertise and producing results.

Public Policy and School Reform

A Research Summary

CPRE's analysis of school funding has led to these observations:

- **Spending decisions can be important.** There is much debate about whether money "matters" to schools, but most observers agree that the ways in which money is spent can have a real impact on schools. For example, some recent research has shown strong effects from boosting teacher quality. But much current spending supports auxiliary programs or services that don't directly affect student achievement.

- **Numerous states have struggled mightily over how to equalize funding for school districts.** These struggles are often heated and politically charged and made even more so by a lack of clear equity targets (such as raising all districts to the current mean funding level). The lack of specific policy targets has also hampered efforts by the courts to make meaningful progress on equity.

- **School funding systems are aging and need to be repaired.** Spending on schools has increased, but today's funding formulas have not equalized funding either among districts or among schools. Also, even the latest and most ambitious school-funding plans provide only modest incentives to spur higher achievement. These old-fashioned formulas seem ill-suited to the current emphases on equity, outcomes and standards, and the recent focus on school-level reform. So far they have produced only modest, short-term gains in funding equity.

- **New reform strategies reveal glaring weaknesses in state school-finance systems.** This is especially true when reforms focus on school-level policy, such as public school choice, charter schools, and site-based management. Truly innovative school finance strategies, such as school-based budgeting, and restructuring teacher compensation to reward those who develop the new skills and competencies, show greater promise to support these new reform directions.

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[redacted] has [redacted] have been relatively flat. Of course, student achievement is affected by many factors besides money, including the social and economic conditions of students and their families, how hard students work, and parental support. Some observers applaud schools for simply holding their own as the social and economic conditions of many students have worsened.

However, it's still critical to find ways to boost student achievement, especially since education funds may become increasingly scarce in the coming years. CPRE researchers have identified several key factors that help explain why increases in school funding in recent years haven't brought about large improvements in student achievement:

- **Unimaginative use of money.** There is no evidence for the often-repeated claim that low student productivity can be blamed on wasteful administrative spending or high teacher salaries. But states and school districts do spend a great deal of money in ways that don't directly affect student achievement. Districts use new money to cut class sizes, expand student services, or enhance services for special student populations, for example. None of these new expenditures seem to have much direct impact on overall student achievement.

- **Focus on services, rather than results.** States and school districts spend considerable time and effort looking for new ways to spend money, such as nutrition programs. These may be worthy causes, but such decisions are usually made on an ad hoc basis. Seldom are spending decisions explicitly based on a careful analysis of the costs of alternatives and the contributions each approach would make to student achievement.

- **Unequal distribution of resources.** Large gaps in funding often exist across districts and between schools within a single district. Wealthier, higher-achieving students have access to more school resources, while poorer, lower achieving students, whose needs for resources are perhaps greater, often receive less.

What can be done to overcome these problems? CPRE research points toward certain practices that hold promise for boosting student achievement. They include:

- **Make achievement the schools' primary goal.** This includes developing very specific goals with a school's staff and building a commitment to these goals among teachers, parents and members of the community, and then developing comprehensive plans for meeting those goals. This would require a serious commitment to focused staff development, using technology and other resources to improve practice, and continuous monitoring of progress.

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- **Enhance curriculum and make sure students are engaged in challenging academic programs.** Secondary students, for example, benefit from taking more academic courses, which can be prompted by stiffer graduation requirements.

- **Manage money, resources, people and time at the school level.** Schools could, for example, create school-level teams empowered to make decisions on teaching practice, spending and other important functions. The principal should serve as a facilitator of this process—not as an authority figure who makes all the important decisions—and the work of the teachers must focus directly on increasing learning.

- **Focus adequate resources and research on high-poverty schools.** The development of effective instruction for disadvantaged students could cost significantly more per student per year. Schools would need to budget these new funds in flexible and creative ways and attend to the capacity of students to learn and of communities to support such learning. The also must see to the repair and replacement of substandard equipment and facilities.

- **Restructure school finance and teacher compensation.** Schools might receive most of their money from districts as lump sums, so that school-level professionals and members of the community can decide how to spend them. Schools also could use pay raises to encourage teachers to develop new skills and knowledge, so they can successfully assume new roles in management and curriculum development.

As we draw closer to the year 2000, education reform remains a high priority in most places. Shifts in policy have had important positive results. The call of the 1990s for high achievement for *all* students itself is an important step.

However, we still have a long way to go. Reformers need to understand the roles and limits of policy and what it can and cannot do to change classroom practice. Reforms must take into account the relations between the different government entities that create and administer education policy. And reformers must focus on questions of capacity to improve instruction and learning.

As we celebrate the completion of CPRE's first ten years (1985-1995), the management and staff of CPRE would like to thank all those who have supported our work. The individuals are too many to name here. They include: all those who have served on CPRE's Executive Board and Research and Dissemination Advisory Committees; staff of the national organizations who have been formally affiliated with CPRE; colleagues at the institutions who are current and former members of CPRE; and colleagues at other universities, the educational laboratories, university-based centers, and national research centers. We especially appreciate the support from foundations and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education. Most of all, we are grateful to the many state and local educators and policymakers who have granted interviews and allowed us into their offices, schools and classrooms to study reform. Without them, our research could not be possible.

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